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Tomorrow's Boards of Education.

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The traditional position of boards of education is being challenged by Federal programs and laws, private business, urbanization, the civil rights movement, teacher militancy, and student activism. If school boards are to survive as viable institutions, they must make some response and accommodation to these challenges. These accommodations must include the reorganization of small districts into larger units, realistic plans of decentralization in the cities, greater recognition of the Negro and other minorities in school government, elimination of paternalistic attitudes toward teachers, more competent student relations, and a unified demand for adequate school funds at the State level. If accommodations can be made and if boards can recognize that they do not have complete control but that they may have considerable influence, the future of the school board is not without hope. On the other hand, if boards continue to operate as usual, the school board will be found obsolete and some other mechanism for local school governance will have to be invented. (TT)

TOMORROW'S BOARDS OF EDUCATION

Roald F. Campbell

These are hard times for boards of education. Despite their lack of power, as contended by some,¹⁾ to boards of education has been delegated by our states the responsibility for the actual operation of the public schools. Thus all of the problems of public education inexorably cast their shadows upon the school boards. Since these problems are exacerbated in our cities school boards in those districts are particularly vulnerable. In a recent survey of the Cincinnati schools for instance, the board of education was seen by most teachers and citizens as a remote body unaware of and perhaps unconcerned with the problems being faced in the school system. We may well wonder if this uniquely American institution, now almost a century and half old, can endure.

Some Challenges

Boards of education are faced with many challenges. Federal legislation, particularly Titles I and III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, represent a challenge for change and innovation. In Title I children from poor families are, for the first time, to be identified and new and or supplementary programs are to be developed for them. In Title III supplementary educational centers with innovative programs are to be developed not by the school districts alone but in collaboration with new partners, such as nonpublic schools, private business, and universities. The call for innovation and new working relationships are the price the school boards must pay for federal funds.

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¹⁾ See James D. Koerner, Who Controls American Education?
Boston: Beacon Press, 1968, ch. 5.

A second challenge to boards of education is found in private business firms. Whereas textbook and supply firms, over the years have catered to the programs of school districts as developed by those districts, new rules of the game are now being applied. More than a score of private educational firms have come into existence, many of which claim the capability of actually operating educational programs. These operations have often included job corps camps and manpower training programs but they need not be limited to such efforts. There are serious proposals that school districts contract with such firms the teaching of arithmetic and reading skills.

A third challenge facing many boards, as suggested above, is the growth of urbanism. This has resulted in very large central city school districts on one hand and surrounding these central cities are hundreds of suburban or bedroom school districts on the other hand. The suburban districts have been largely populated by the middle class whites who have fled the cities and the cities have become increasingly populated by lower class blacks. These population shifts, often augmented by federal programs for housing and highways, have contributed to our social and class cleavages. Programs for schools and other services in the cities became more expensive just as the tax base, due in part to the decentralization of industry, decreases. We are just beginning to recognize the interdependence of all the segments in the entire metropolitan area.

Still another challenge to school boards is the civil rights revolution with all the problems of racism and inverse racism. Negroes now demand that they have some voice in those decisions that affect them. Moreover, they insist that no mayor, no school board, and no other governmental agency shall any longer designate Negro leaders. Rather, Negroes shall select their own leaders.



These demands, over-all, suggest that the Negro is attempting, for the first time, to take his full place in American society. To be sure, the demands are often put in abrasive language and enunciated by extreme militants. Particularly troublesome to school boards are the time dimensions; for instance, black history and black principals, now.

A fifth challenge is already obvious to most school boards; the militancy of teachers. In the competition for teacher allegiance, each local unit whether affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers or the National Education Association has felt compelled to demonstrate that no one can be more militant than we. There is now serious talk about joining the two organizations but the long-run prospects are that teachers will continue to demand a greater voice in policy making than they have enjoyed historically.

Perhaps the most recent challenge is that of student revolt. Students for a Democratic Society, whose activities were once limited to the colleges are conducting an active campaign in the high schools. Many high schools also have underground newspapers and there is a national student-run press service to feed them. Frequently, the students most susceptible to the new revolt are bright, sophisticated youngsters from middle class homes. Like their older counterparts they find the establishment, including the school, unjust, stupid, and irrelevant. A special deviation of the student revolt is the growing militancy of black students.

With the traditional place of the board of education being threatened or at least challenged by the federal government, private business, the growth of urbanism, the civil rights movement, the militancy of teachers, and the student revolt, the prospects for tomorrow's school boards may appear to be rather bleak.

Responses Demanded

But this is no time for despair. Instead there must be some response and accommodation to these challenges. To begin with boards of education ought to join the larger society. In the future there appears to be no place for small enclaves of people to escape the main stream of American life. Just as we have reduced the number of our school districts from 100,000 to 20,000 we still need to reduce them to about 5,000. In this process we shall probably give up, as public school districts, the Winnetkas, the Shaker Heights, and the Scarsdales. Each of these areas will probably become part of a larger unit for school purposes. In this process each school district will become more heterogeneous and be a more valid reflection of the nation itself. Hopefully, we will be able to respond more fully to the objective enunciated by John Dewey long ago; making available to all the children the quality of education heretofore desired for some of the children.

Whereas, many suburban and rural districts must be reorganized into larger school districts, some form of decentralization must be established in our larger cities. This is no easy program as, the experience in New York's Ocean Hill-Brownsville district suggests. What is needed is a more realistic approach to decentralization. Complete decentralization is obviously out of the question. Every area of a city is still part of the city, the region, the state, and the nation and there is an interdependence in our society between any local unit and the larger units of which it is a component. At the same time, in terms of the delivery of services, including education, there must be an opportunity for more local participation and influence. In terms of resources most city neighborhoods will need help from the entire city, the state and indeed the nation itself. The task is to distinguish between what can and should be decentralized and what cannot.

As part of this accommodation the Negro and other minority groups must be given a greater place in the sun. More than is now the case, able Negroes should be sought for places on boards of education and other governmental bodies. Much of the decentralization of cities, alluded to above, will affect Negroes since Negroes make up a substantial part of the population of every large city. In each Negro neighborhood of the city communication must be established with indigenous individuals and groups and not with outsiders who pose as representatives of such groups whether they be alderman, often white, maintaining addresses in black neighborhoods or do-gooders, again often white, who apparently have not yet discovered that Negroes can speak for themselves.

Another response required from many boards of education is the discontinuance of paternalism. Often boards, even with the best of intentions, have tended to treat teachers paternalistically. In many districts, particularly suburban and rural districts, boards have frowned on teachers organization and have often assumed that boards knew what was best for teachers. This kind of behavior on the part of the board will no longer suffice. Teachers are insisting that they speak for themselves, they do not want the superintendent, no matter who he is, representing them to the board of education. We still lack adequate procedures for the interchange between teachers and school boards but those procedures can probably be developed if teachers are taken seriously and if both sides seek workable procedures.

School boards also need to recognize that there is, at times, some merit to the positions taken by students who revolt. Some school procedures are too routinized. Some practices probably ought to be questioned. Some schools appear to be too bookish and inadequate use is made of such devices as travel and work as educative experiences.

Some teachers and principals apparently fear open discussion with students. A willingness to meet students half way does not mean that all standards are discarded. Indeed, students need boundaries at school as they do at home but these boundaries should represent our explicit values and not merely our whims.

Finally, in many states, board members have every reason to demand that the state support education more adequately than is now the case. In a real sense, every board member is a state officer not merely a local representative. It seems rather ridiculous for thousands of board members to accept responsibility for organizing and operating the schools in the name of the state without making very real demands on the state for the resources necessary to that end. Anything less than fifty percent of the operating costs of the public schools from state sources appears to be inadequate. Indeed, one could logically insist that all expenditures needed to achieve a state foundation program should come from state sources even if those sources included a uniform property tax levied and collected by the state.

The Future

I have suggested above that school boards accommodate to the challenges facing them. These accommodations include the reorganization of small districts into larger units, realistic plans of decentralization in the cities, greater recognition of the Negro and other minorities in school government, elimination of paternalistic attitudes toward teachers, more competent student relations, and a unified demand for adequate school funds at the state level.

These responses, I hope, suggest that the future of the board of education is a contingent one. If accommodations can

be made, if school districts can be maintained as relevant units in a larger political structure, if boards can recognize that they do not have complete control but that they may have considerable influence, I think the future of the board of education is not without hope. On the other hand, if boards continue to operate as usual, if the interdependent position of the board in our total society is not recognized, if minorities claiming full rights of citizenship are denied, if teachers are treated as hired hands, if students are not treated as people, I suspect the board of education will be found obsolete and some other mechanism for local school governance will have to be invented. I hope that such a course will not become necessary, that instead board members, school administrators, state legislators, congressmen, citizens, and in fact all of those who help define and implement the role of the board of education can adapt to today's world.

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